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Should women be shielded from combat?

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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Spec. Xao Her went to Iraq with a quartermaster company that was supposed to provide supplies to all-male combat troops.

Instead, her company came under frequent attack. "When you're in Iraq, you're in a war zone," said the 28-year-old Army Reservist from St. Paul. "We were under fire almost every week."

Her's experience is common among the 60,000 women who have been deployed in support of the war in Iraq over the past two years, a number that is reshaping the debate in Congress over women's role in the military.

In an effort to keep women out of combat, a House committee approved a measure Thursday that would bar women from jobs related to direct combat operations, codifying a 1994 Pentagon policy that critics say is out of date.

"When the Pentagon policy was written, it was with traditional warfare in mind," said Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn. "No one imagined September 11. No one imagined that servicemen and women sitting in a cafeteria in Mosul eating dinner would have someone come in as a suicide bomber killing people."

McCollum, Minnesota's only woman in Congress, is part of a Democratic faction fighting to stop or weaken the committee provision, which is part of a \$441 billion military spending bill that is expected to go to the House floor next week.

Republican backers on the House Armed Services Committee say the measure is necessary to clarify the U.S. military's policy of keeping women out of combat as it modernizes and reorganizes to face the insurgent battles of the future.

"You can come under mortar attack sitting in the Green Zone in Baghdad," said Rep. John Kline, R-Minn., a retired Marine colonel who sits on the committee. "But I don't think women should be in positions like infantry, special forces and light armored vehicles, forces whose job it is to go out and kill the enemy."

In some ways, the debate is a reprise of the one that followed the 1991 Gulf War, where women made

up a larger proportion of U.S. active duty, Reserve and National Guard forces than ever before.

But Iraq -- with no front lines and a guerrilla insurgency aimed at military and civilian targets alike -- presents a definition of warfare that seems to defy any neat separation between combatants and noncombatants.

"It's nonlinear combat. Everyone's a combatant," said Col. Ginny Johnson, a Minnesota Air National Guard member who volunteered to go to Iraq last year. "Women are up close and personal to danger in all the support roles that they have."

A sweeping ban

With women making up about 20 percent of the troops in Iraq, the Pentagon weighed in against a more sweeping ban on women in combat support and service units that was approved by Republicans on the Armed Services Committee last week.

Lt. Gen. James Campbell, who is director of the Army staff at the Pentagon, wrote in a letter to the committee's top Democrat that the Republican proposal could close as many as 21,925 jobs to female soldiers that they now hold or could hold.

In a separate letter to House leaders, Gen. Richard Codey, the Army's vice chief of staff, said that the proposal would "cause confusion in the ranks and will send the wrong signal to the brave young men and women fighting the Global War on Terrorism."

Pentagon officials maintain that their current policy allows women to serve in a variety of capacities while balancing the public's concerns about women in direct ground combat.

Although McCollum is not on the Armed Services Committee, she said she has conferred closely with Loretta Sanchez of California and other Democrats who are. McCollum called the panel's original proposal "outrageous, out of touch with reality and blatantly unpatriotic."

The measure the committee approved Thursday is more narrowly drawn, writing into law the Defense Department's current policy of barring women from direct combat. It also requires a vote by Congress before women could be allowed into direct combat units.

Backers of the new language say it doesn't change a single assignment or job availability for women. Critics say it is unnecessary.

Confidence cited

The debate in Congress has also focused on job equality and the prospects for career advancement in the

military, which often hinges on having been in combat.

"This really undermines the ability of women to fully participate in the military, which is important to women seeking to make the military a career," McCollum said. She also argued that the move could undermine military recruiting among women, as well as the confidence of the male soldiers who serve with them.

"What happens to the morale of our troops if in having this discussion they're being told the woman next to you, who's been watching your back and whom you've depended on, is all of a sudden not qualified?"

Kline said the troops are being told no such thing. "There's partisan language here working an agenda," he said. "Nobody denies that women serving in Iraq are in danger, that they're serving bravely and doing hard work and that it's just as hot for them as it is for men. ... But that's a different issue than having them tote a machine gun and attack a hill. I think we should not do that, and I think society as a whole is not ready for that."

Kline said that it's human nature for male commanders to be more protective of female soldiers and that they shouldn't be put in that position in battle.

McCollum said that's the same argument that was used to keep women off police forces.

Col. Johnson said the standard should not be gender but training and ability. "If people have the same training, women and men will perform at the same ability," she said.

As for Spec. Her: "I think it should be your choice."

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